Evoking humanity: Reflections on the importance of university museums and collections

ALAN D. GILBERT

Abstract

In this paper, Professor Alan Gilbert, President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester, welcomes UMAC delegates and explains why he feels that museums in general - and university museums in particular - are singularly important.

It seems rather pointless for me to welcome you all to this 8th Conference of the International Committee for University Museums and Collections, because you have already been in session all day.

But I can welcome you warmly to The University of Manchester. That's what University Presidents do on these occasions. According to the conventional script, they use the pretext of welcoming visitors to the university to indulge in a little institutional boasting about their university. Indeed, an address of welcome by a University President, on the one hand, and institutional hubris, on the other, go readily together – rather like gin-and-tonic. Properly done, both have considerable feel-good effects, albeit without adding much genuine or long-term value.

Before abandoning my script, I should therefore tell you that Manchester is the largest University in the UK, whether you count pounds sterling or people; that it is a significant research institution, investing around £400 million per annum into its research activities; and that it is in the process of completing the largest capital programme in UK higher education history, driven by a commitment to make the entire campus thoroughly fit for 21st century purposes by 2015.

There! I've paid sufficient lip service to the conventional formula.

Feeling a little more ambitious this evening, let me now try to express something rather more complex, and try to explain why museums – and university museums and collections in particular – are singularly important.

In doing so, I'm afraid that I have more questions than answers; and I embark on my task with considerable trepidation. All attempts to probe matters of deep human significance, whether in art, music, literature, formal speeches or informal observations, confront what Aldus Huxley once called "the limits of the expressible". We wish to communicate something that we find deeply meaningful, something, perhaps, that probes the most fundamental of human values, beliefs, assumptions or prejudices – something that goes to the very heart of our shared human consciousness, or that moves us profoundly – and language itself becomes a barrier. We can't find the words to plumb the depths of consciousness that we wish to explore.

So instead (and this is too common an expedient when confronted with things that matter deeply), we retreat onto the safer ground of second-order considerations.

Thus, for example, there are many mundane, straightforward, perfectly respectable reasons to champion the cause of museums and collections, and to advocate their location within universities. For one thing, such institutions have important adjunct value to lend to education at all levels. We can confidently count visits by school children and family groups and members of the general public as indices of the success of a museum or gallery, without feeling any pressing need to explain why such visits are beneficial. We can note that researchers often find museums and galleries useful, and

sometimes indispensable. We can value museums and collections as tourist attractions and places where people of all ages are at once entertained and informed.

All these observations are valid, and together they constitute a telling case for investing in museums and collections and hosting them in universities.

But they leave a whole lot unsaid, and difficult to capture in words and sentences.

For in the evident need of ***Homo sapiens*** – our species – to create museums and galleries and other records of the past – there is, I think, much more than a sophisticated passing interest in other people and earlier ages. One of the main truths about human consciousness is that it is bounded by mystery. Ever the wisest and most informed among us can only give limited and partial answers to the fundamental questions that confront our self-conscious species: Who are we? What are we doing here? What shall become of us? It is to a significant extent the search for answers to such questions that moves us to look into the minds of other people and earlier ages. Knowing more about where we have come from, and how our forebears coped with their own fears and aspirations, promises to give us some kind of reference point from which to understand the directions open to our own generation.

Many of us who live in Western cultures are no longer religious in any traditional sense. We are not often blessed with genuine experiences of the numinous. Yet even for us, for whom the empirical so readily trumps the spiritual, there are occasions and experiences that transcend the mundane, limited rationality of modern life.

Why, I am curious to know, can some tenuous, even fragmentary link to people and cultures far removed from us in time and space sometimes evoke in us the deepest and truest intellectual and emotional experiences: awe at the very fact of our own existence; profound curiosity about who we are and why we are here; a deep longing to know what great story we seem to be part of?

We feel like that, I think, because we are to so great an extent – individually and culturally - what our past has made us. Not entirely, of course. We are also what our genetic inheritance has gifted us; just as we are shaped by visions and hopes and fears of the future, near and far away.

But the past is singularly potent in fashioning human consciousness and identity. We can forget this for long periods, although being oblivious to our heritage does not free us from its influence. Then, in particular times and places, suddenly and with arresting force, an almost palpable sense of our association with events long past and people long dead confronts us with deep truths or deeply formative questions about our own humanity.

I recall, for example, visiting the archives of the Hoover Institute at Stanford University some years ago, and being handed a single sheet of paper. It was a *pro forma* of the kind produced in the days before photocopying by typists cutting a reproducible stencil onto waxed paper. This particular stencilled *pro forma* had been run off by the US Armed Forces during the Second World War. Aged over almost half a century and nondescript in appearance, it had been filled in the summer of 1945 by someone who must have had the very highest of wartime security clearances.

What the archivist was allowing me to handle was the actual piece of paper first handed to Colonel Paul Tibbets, the commanding officer of *Enola Gay*, a B-29 Superfortress of the US Army's 393 Bombardment Squadron, when he and his crew were entrusted with a very special mission on 6 August 1945. Together with a range of mundane details about when to take-off, what the initial flight plan would be and how the final destination would be relayed to the crew en route, a single, haunting word had been typed in to let the crew know what kind of weapon they would deploy. This weapon, I read, as Colonel Tibbets himself had read before me, was "special", so special that when en route he

was told that the target was the Japanese city of Hiroshima, he was also given instructions about how quickly *Enola Gay* would have to exit the target area.

That word “special”, typed innocuously on a fading stencil, was one of the great understatements of history. The first atomic bomb ever to be used as a weapon changed the meaning of life on earth. What John F. Kennedy was to say at his Inauguration fifteen and a half years later - that humankind now held in mortal hands the power to destroy all forms of human life - had *not* been demonstrably true before 6 August 1945. But once that “special” weapon had exploded over Hiroshima the spectre of self-inflicted annihilation would henceforth stalk humankind, probably inescapably.

So there I was, in an archive in a great university, holding in my hands a single sheet of paper that linked me, palpably, with one of the great denouements in human history. As every museum curator knows, intrinsically ephemeral artifacts can be like that, if they can transport us back to intrinsically important human decisions, events or associations. So I felt awe in that Hoover Institute archive, and something akin to dread: a fleeting, powerful, existential awareness not only of the tenuousness of human life on earth, but of how much more frightening the world had become now that *Homo sapiens* had succumbed finally to the temptation, as old as Adam, to be godlike.

Dread, fortunately, is not the only emotion to be evoked in places where, as in this Manchester Museum, we come face to face with the human past. Some of these places are outdoor museums.

Join me at the mouth of a great cave in southern France, where prehistoric women and men once stood, warmed by their fires and comforted by the security that fire and solid rock and social solidarity together provided, and be deeply moved. Walk with me among the weathered sandstone of Uberi Rock in the Kakadu region of Northern Australia, where the sandstone ledges of great natural shelters have been polished like glass by the sheer length of time that humankind have walked and sat and reclined there. View there rich cave art in wonderful natural galleries curated with care continuously for more than 40,000 years, and feel the powerful sense of the numinous that a great Cathedral evokes: the sense of being kindred in some profoundly important, inexpressible way, with countless generations of men and women.

More precisely, learn something about our common humanity by reflecting on the lives and consciousness of those countless generations:

- feeling at once kindred to them and altogether unlike them;
- admiring their resilience in a hostile world bereft of all the promethean skills and technology that *Homo sapiens* would later accumulate;
- wondering what, if anything, they expected of the future, and whether they shared the greatest regret of our self-conscious, mortal species – the lost chance to know the rest of the tantalising human story;
- admiring their determination to convey their thoughts across the generations in those paintings on the cave walls;
- asking whether they did this only for contemporary purposes, while nevertheless believing (as an article of faith) that they were also reaching out to later generations – and to our generation – enriching our consciousness with some limited, fragmentary sharing of who they were and what they valued and how they dreamed; and
- wishing, wistfully, childishly even, that it were possible to travel back and let them know how their story has unfolded so far.

Those, I think, are the sentiments that a great museum stimulates; those some of the questions a great museum evokes.

For it is given to humankind, being mortal, to live at the moving hinge of history, shaped by what has gone before, shaping (if only to a limited extent) what is to come, and conscious of being only part of a saga whose end remains unknowable.

If (and this is what I have been trying to suggest) it is in such realities that the deepest human values are anchored, then we demean and impoverish that humanity in the absence of the kind of profound respect for the past that inspires and shapes the collections and exhibitions of great museums and galleries.

It follows that museums and galleries are essential, not secondary, manifestations of what it means to be human.

And because that is true, an authentic museum must itself operate at the hinge of history, being as preoccupied with the present and the future as it is with the past; reminding us – again and again – that we are all actors in a story that transcends us, and that at every moment in time – as it was at every moment in human history – the future is open, threatening and beckoning with myriad possibilities and possibilities; reminding us also that for a little while, if we are knowledgeable enough and courageous enough and lucky enough, we can ourselves - for better or for worse – write a tiny part of the human story.

A great museum, in short, is an educational institution *par excellence*. The great bulk of human knowledge and creativity emerges, inductively and deductively, from what we already know, from the knowledge we have inherited and not forgotten. If you know nothing about the past you can neither make sense of the present nor learn anything new.

So a great university is, already, among other things, a museum, even if it does not always recognise the fact. It is enhanced by hosting its own museums and/or galleries because such institutions resonate powerfully with the very idea of a university.

So museums and universities fit together – better, even, than gin-and-tonic or University Presidents and hubris! An authentic university, like a great museum, is a humanist institution, at once respectful of earlier creativity and endlessly curious and questioning of received wisdom; standing on the shoulders of giants while determined to outstrip them; and, above all, committed to learning.

Contact

Professor Alan D. Gilbert, AO, MA, DPhil, FASSA
President and Vice-Chancellor
Address: The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M139PL, United Kingdom
E-mail: president(at)manchester.ac.uk
www.manchester.ac.uk